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JOINT TERMINAL ATTACK CONTROLLER:  
SEPARATING FACT FROM FICTION

by

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## *Preface*

This paper will hopefully provide some light on the subject of terminal attack controllers and the certification and training requirements to bring this huge combat capability to the fight. During Operation ENDURING FREEDOM many combat controllers and tactical air control party personnel were responsible for achieving great effects on the battlefields of Afghanistan. How the Defense Department decides to develop this capability is a series of open ended questions. Today, however, the services must decide on a minimum qualification that ensures proficiency and safety. Calling in 2,000 pound bombs from an aircraft going 600 mph is very different than calling in artillery fire. These training requirements must be realistic since there is a limited amount of sorties that can be flown. The author hopes to provide some realistic recommendations in this paper. The author would like to thank many of his sources but especially Lt Col Mark LeSage for his mentorship in this paper's evolution.

### ***Abstract***

Operation ENDURING FREEDOM in Afghanistan highlighted the dramatic, synergistic capabilities achieved by the Special Operation Forces (SOF) and airpower. Just prior to OEF, the Joint Chiefs of Staff had established an Executive Steering Committee, which adopted a grass roots qualification for ground forward air controllers (GFACs) called the Joint Terminal Attack Controller (JTAC) program. The JTAC program is designed to serve as a cross service “driver’s license” or credentialization for GFACs from all services. Once finalized, the JTAC program will enhance the nation’s ability to apply airpower whenever and wherever needed, while also reducing the chance of fratricide. However, many hurdles remain prior to accomplishing this goal. Each service, for the first time, must accept a common, joint training and evaluation standard that applies across the components.

The research begins by discussing the historical background that led up to the JTAC concept. The paper discusses the draft Joint Publication 3-09.3 (Joint Close Air Support) and highlights the important changes this publication will make such as codifying the JTAC program. The research also presents the recommended JTAC currency requirements of 12 live, fixed-wing aircraft controls per year for each controller.

The roles, missions, and command relationship of full time AF controllers (the TACP and combat controller) are discussed with the recommendation that AFSOC, via Special Tactics, own and employ all SOF air controllers. Additionally, three recommendations are made to fix the large delta between JTAC training requirements and actual assets available for training. First,

the AF should mandate through the Ready Aircrew Program (RAP) that CAS qualified aircrew routinely participate in training with GFACs. Secondly, live-fly training must be prioritized by a joint prioritization board. Lastly, the AF must establish a tracking mechanism that determines how much CAS training is being done, who's getting it, and who needs it.

Additional recommendations include prioritizing money in order to develop a simulation that will help fill the gap between JTAC training requirements and limited live assets. Finally, SOCOM needs to appoint AF Special Operation Command as the executive agent to oversee SOF close air support issues, to include JTAC.



## **Chapter 1**

# **SETTING THE CONDITIONS**

## **Background**

The art of US military operations is evolving from the legacy of linear battles such as World War II and Korea into a non-linear battlespace where forces operate fluidly across the joint area of operations to achieve maximum effect on the enemy regardless of space or depth on the battlefield.<sup>1</sup> Operation ENDURING FREEDOM is an example of this non-linear warfare where small special operations teams operated throughout the battlespace to find, target and destroy the enemy through airpower. The key element in this process was the ground terminal attack controller (TAC) who precisely and efficiently maximized airpower's ability to effect the enemy. Whether on horseback with the Northern Alliance or as part of a coalition strategic reconnaissance team, TACs help make airpower decisive on the non-linear battlefield. The essential skill the TAC brings to the fight of integrating air and ground power to achieve decisive results is a shining example of military transformation.<sup>2</sup> However, the supportable number of TACs is constrained by the ability to provide live, realistic training from fighter and attack aircraft to maintain not only the TAC's proficiency but also to conduct initial TAC training and qualification. This paper will discuss and provide recommendations for maximizing the TACs capability while constrained with the reality of training with live aircraft.

## **Problem Significance**

The AF experienced three fratricide incidents in the 36 months preceding Operation IRAQI FREEDOM, all of which involved special operations forces (SOF). General Holland, Commander, US Special Operations Command (SOCOM), has requested an in-depth look into the causes of these AF/SOF “friendly-fire” incidents in order to “fix the problem.”<sup>3</sup> The on-going global war on terrorism will require continued, if not increased, use of SOF-directed airstrikes. Implementation of the recommendations of this paper will hopefully reduce the number of future friendly fire events.

## **Research Question**

How should US Special Operations Command maximize the combat capability that Terminal Attack Controllers bring to the fight given the limited amount of available live training sorties?

## **Scope**

The research conducted and the recommendations proposed by this paper will focus on near term (<5 year) issues regarding training, qualification and proficiency requirements for TACs. The endstate of this work is to provide an actionable recommendation on who should get TAC certification and what should be the minimum requirements for certification and proficiency. The intent of this research is to maximize combat power, not to push a service agenda. This paper is part one of a five-part course of action by SOCOM to reduce fratricide between SOF and airpower.<sup>4</sup>

## **Research Methodology**

The research method used in this paper involves fusing together multi-agency sources and interviews from subject matter experts. Joint Staff, Air Staff, Office of Secretary of Defense, Army Staff, SOCOM staff, and numerous subject matter experts were interviewed to gather the latest, most relevant information on this dynamic subject.

## **Overview**

This paper is divided into four chapters. Chapter One provides background, significance, states the research question, presents the paper's scope, and research method used. Chapter two provides the background which includes a discussion of the role of TAC on the battlefield, an overview of Joint Pub 3-09.3, the emergence and growth of the joint terminal attack controller program, and presentation of proposed joint training and proficiency standards. Chapter three presents observations and issues discussing the unique nature of SOF TAC operations vice conventional operations, SOF TAC force structure, the role of virtual simulation, training prioritization, and SOF TAC oversight. Chapter four will give recommendations and provide conclusions; it will assess the impact of the JTAC program on SOF capability, recommend the right mix of TACs based on proficiency requirements, and recommend a SOCOM TAC executive agent.

## **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Lt Col Bowers, AF Center for Doctrine, Research and Education, Maxwell AFB, AL., interviewed by author, 11 Feb 03.

<sup>2</sup> Donald H. Rumsfeld, "Military Transformation" in *NS Coursebook AY 2003*, ed. WG CDR Stephen Cockram and Sharon McBride (Maxwell AFB, Ala.: ACSC, August 2002), 144.

<sup>3</sup> COL Robert H. Holmes, Special Assistant to Commander US Special Operations Command, interviewed via phone by author, 6 October 2002.

<sup>4</sup> Holmes interview.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Background**

#### **History of Terminal Attack Control**

Historically, airmen on the ground have provided the “airmanship” necessary to integrate airpower with ground operations. During World War II, both the USAAF and USMC used airman (whether AF or Marine) to plan and direct airstrikes. The intent of this structure was to ensure airpower was used effectively while minimizing the risk of fratricide. During Vietnam, many un-certified ground forces called in airstrikes but used the intermediary airborne forward air controller to orchestrate the attack and provide final clearance. Naval Special Warfare (a.k.a. SEALs) have also trained with Navy air assets and in some cases have received TAC NATO certification. In addition to the Marines and Navy, two TAC qualifications have evolved within the AF. The first is the Tactical Air Control Party (TACP). The TACP is made up of both Enlisted Terminal Attack Controllers (ETACs) and Air Liaison Officers (ALOs), who are normally rated officers. The ALO and ETAC both are qualified to control airstrikes as part of the TACP element of the theater air ground system. The TACP is the backbone of the Air Force’s interface to conventional army forces. The second qualification is the Special Operations Terminal Attack Controller (SOTAC), which is an enlisted or officer Combat Controller who has been trained and meets TAC requirements.<sup>1</sup> The SOTACs exist to control air/ground operations in support of joint SOF objectives, acting unilaterally or as part of a joint

team. To summarize, there are currently four different qualification standards (USMC, SEAL, AF TACP, AF SOTAC) within the US military for terminal attack controllers.<sup>2</sup>

## **Enter the Joint Terminal Attack Controller**

During the summer of 2000, AF combat controllers (who are organized into Special Tactics Teams) experienced difficulty in getting approval to operate on a number of ranges in the US and also were questioned on their accreditation as TACs during Operation ALLIED FORCE.<sup>3</sup> Because of these issues on the inter-relationship of TAC “driver’s licenses,” the Special Tactics community launched an initiative to have a common “driver’s license” for all TACs.<sup>4</sup> From this initiative, the Joint Terminal Attack Controller (JTAC) program was conceived. Since 2000, many events, including OEF, have spotlighted TACs and brought the JTAC program into the inter-service political arena. Following Operation ANACONDA, the US Army has expressed great interest in the JTAC program with the intent of qualifying up to 1,000 Army JTACs.<sup>5</sup> In November of 2002, the JCS had chartered a Joint Close Air Support (JCAS) Executive Steering Committee (ESC) who identified the issue of having “standardized training of joint terminal attack controllers throughout the Services, USSOCOM, and other DoD agencies/organizations [that] will improve joint force interoperability and effectiveness while reducing the potential for mishaps and fratricide.”<sup>6</sup> The JCAS ESC endstate is to “create implement, and enforce a DoD common standard of training for individuals performing joint terminal control from ground positions.”<sup>7</sup> In summary, the JTAC program began as a grass-roots effort to jointly recognize TAC credentials but as this paper will next illustrate, the JTAC program has become center stage for an inter-service roles and missions fight.

### **Joint Publication 3-09.3: *Joint Close Air Support***

The vehicle that will codify and implement the JTAC program is the 2003 revision of Joint Publication 3-09.3 (JP 3-09.3). The Draft JP 3-09.3 states that the JTAC is “a qualified (certified) Service member who, from a forward position, directs the action of combat aircraft engaged in Close Air Support and other offensive air operations. A qualified and current JTAC will be recognized across DOD as capable and authorized to perform terminal attack control.”<sup>8</sup> This definition is critical since it is the first time in US military history where a common TAC qualification has been recognized. However, JP 3-09.3 has some major hurdles to overcome prior to being approved and published. The OSD’s JCAS JTF had been the lead agency to spearhead the implementation of the JTAC program. On the 14<sup>th</sup> of February 2003, the JCAS JTF determined that three issues were irresolvable at the action officer level and needed to be pushed forward to the JCS for resolution.<sup>9</sup> Although there was agreement between the AF, USMC and USN, the Army had issues that could not be resolved. The majority of these concerns dealt with the emerging Army requirement for qualifying up to 1,000 personnel as JTACs.<sup>10</sup> Although different Service perspectives exist, the survival of JTAC appears not to be in question. What training requirements will be required of JTACs, however, fuel the inter-service debate, which in turn will determine when the program will be implemented.

### **The Issues: Training, Qualification and Proficiency Requirements**

The three issues delaying the publication of JP 3-09.3 all hinge on the specific requirements to train, qualify (check ride) and maintain proficiency as a war-ready JTAC. These three as yet irresolvable issues are:

1. Should JTAC proficiency require coordination with a ground maneuver unit?
2. Are fixed wing (fast moving aircraft) and rotary wing (helicopter) calls for fire synonymous?

3. Can some training requirements be met using simulated vice real aircraft?<sup>11</sup>

Excluding the above three issues, the JCAS JTF was able to get joint agreement on many other vital areas, one of which is the definitions of “certified” and “qualified:”

**“Certified:** an individual who has attended the appropriate service level school and has been trained to the standards of a JTAC.

**Qualified:** a certified individual who has maintained currency by achieving the established minimum recurring training requirements.”<sup>12</sup>

The JCAS JTF also delineated the number and type of controls needed to maintain proficiency. A qualified JTAC “must conduct six controls (a control being a single event, beginning with fighter check-in and ending with drop clearance) within the preceding six months.”<sup>13</sup> This information is the starting point in determining how many training sorties are required to keep the DoD’s JTAC force minimally proficient. Initially, the training and qualification process for a JTAC will begin at one of the three TAC schools whose owning service will enforce basic training/qualification standards. These three schools are:

1. USMC Expeditionary Warfare Training Group Tactical Air Control Party Course
2. USAF Air Ground Operations Tactical Air Controller Course
3. Naval Strike and Air Warfare Center Navy Special Warfare Controller Course<sup>14</sup>

So, following initial qualification at one of these three schools, each JTAC will require six controls in a six month period in order maintain a “qualified” status.

## Summary

The JTAC program will provide the ability for any service to control CAS or Air Interdiction. The JCAS program is DoD wide and encompasses everything from the most basic infantry soldier trying to save his buddies to split-second engagement of nationally sensitive, mobile, time critical targets by SOF teams supporting the air campaign. The remainder of this

paper will focus on the latter by looking at how best to employ the JTAC concept for maximum effect by Special Operations Forces (SOF).

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Joint Publication (JP) 1-02, *DoD Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, 12 April 2001, 398.

<sup>2</sup> Major Michael Martin, Chief, Fire Support Operations 720<sup>th</sup> Special Tactics Group interviewed by author via phone, 21 Jan 03.

<sup>3</sup> Martin interview.

<sup>4</sup> Martin interview.

<sup>5</sup> Maj James E. Quinn USMC, Office of Secretary of Defense Joint Task Force-Joint Close Air Support, interviewed by author via phone, 4 February 2003.

<sup>6</sup> JCAS Executive Steering Committee, *Joint Close Air Support Plan DRAFT*, 22 Nov 02, 1.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 3.

<sup>8</sup> Draft Joint Publication (JP) 3-09.3, *Joint Close Air Support Procedures DRAFT*, 30 Jan 03.

<sup>9</sup> Quinn e-mail interview 14 February 2003.

<sup>10</sup> Maj James E. Quinn USMC, Office of Secretary of Defense Joint Task Force-Joint Close Air Support, interviewed by author via phone, 4 February 2003.

<sup>11</sup> Quinn, interviewed via e-mail, 14 Feb 03.

<sup>12</sup> Maj B.P. Annichario USMC, Office of Secretary of Defense Joint Task Force-Joint Close Air Support, interviewed by author via e-mail, 14 February 2003.

<sup>13</sup> Maj James E. Quinn USMC, Office of Secretary of Defense Joint Task Force-Joint Close Air Support, interviewed by author via e-mail, 26 November 2002.

<sup>14</sup> Quinn interview via e-mail 26 November 2002.



## **Chapter 3**

### **Applying JTAC to SOF**

#### **Airpower: SOF Critical Element**

Operation ENDURING FREEDOM (OEF) illustrated an already known partnership between airpower and SOF. Whether SOF is supporting airpower, as can be argued in the case of OEF, or whether airpower supports SOF, the two are inseparable. SOF's ability to operate, like airpower, across the breadth and width of the battle space enables many target sets to be hit by SOF or airpower or both. The "both" category applies to many of the missions in the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT). The SOF team has ground truth intelligence to conduct the find, fix and target phases of General Jumper's kill chain. Airpower engages while SOF assesses the results. SOF's vital role in the kill chain was not invented during OEF, but certainly validated. Not only is airpower sometimes reliant on SOF but in many SOF mission profiles, airpower is a critical enabler. The Special Forces (SF) Operational Detachment Alpha (ODA) that was surrounded in DESERT STORM by Iraqi Army forces was unquestionably saved by the flight of F-16's that ultimately subdued the enemy threat. Airpower was used in that instance as a quick reaction force because no other assets could rapidly come to their aid when trouble arose and decisive firepower was necessary. Airpower and SOF will continue to grow into a greater symbiotic relationship.<sup>1</sup>

## **JTAC's Relevance in SOF Fight**

A large capability gap exists between the skill necessary to conduct emergency close air support and the actual ability to employ airpower to its greatest effectiveness. The JTAC program will fill this gap much as the nation's program to train emergency medical technicians and paramedics did for national trauma care in the 1970s. The JTAC will enable regular SOF team members, who specialize in other skills, to safely conduct close air support operations. This will significantly reduce the risk to troops and mission when a full-time air controller is not available. However, airpower application -- to include airspace management, aircraft control and deconfliction, and weapon application planning, will continue to best be done by a full-time airman. This assessment is not a part of a political agenda, but a fact based on mission familiarization. Asking a traditional ground force soldier to understand all the issues surrounding coordinate based targeting, combat airspace management and airpower command and control is the same as asking an airman to understand the specifics of mechanized maneuver warfare. Warfare is complicated; effective airpower application is perhaps more so. The JTAC program is a giant leap in closing the gap created between Vietnam era emergency CAS and synergistic application of multiple joint airpower elements. Therefore, the needs of the mission drive the controller requirement. If the mission is a straightforward single target laser designation mission or on-call CAS, a JTAC will have the skills to meet the mission requirements. However, if the mission is air-centric, involving multiple Time on Targets (TOTs), varied aircraft and weapons and is conducted for a prolonged period, an airpower expert such as a combat controller or TACP provides the best capabilities to ensure mission success. Thus, the JTAC program provides "paramedic" level skills for emergency and rapidly developing situations while enabling the limited number of airpower "surgeons" to focus on the

air-centric missions. This team approach maximizes the utility of SOF ground/air operations by providing the proper level of capability to maximize SOF's ability to have strategic effects with tactical operations.

## **JTAC Training Resources**

While conducting research for this paper, the author found one constant: there is not enough live training to support the current number of TACs in the AF, USMC and Navy. The problem is not quantifiable since no one tracks the number of CAS sorties conducted with or available to GFACs.<sup>2</sup> The AF does not even require pilots to work with ground controllers as part of their CAS currency.<sup>3</sup> Even worse, units that are not specifically directed to conduct CAS missions in their Designed Operational Capability (DOC) statements such as bombers have no requirement to talk to a live GFAC. This results in learning on the fly in combat as was done during Operation ENDURING FREEDOM. A quick look at the numbers illustrates the challenge of keeping a small (pre-JTAC) controller force at the basic proficiency level. DoD has approximately 1,250 controllers (100 USMC TACPs, 75 NSW TACs, 800 AF TACPs, and 275 combat control SOTACs).<sup>4</sup> The JCAS Executive Steering Committee recommended on 12 March 2003 that each JTAC would require a minimum of 12 fixed wing controls per year for minimum currency.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, a minimum of 15,000 actual controls with live aircraft are needed to keep the pre-JTAC number of controllers at a *basic* level. The JTAC program will allow an unchecked number of controllers from all services, including 1,000+ US Army, to enter into competition for these limited live-fly training opportunities. These numbers do not include sorties above the bare-minimum requirement. Therefore, one can conclude from the preceding analysis that the JTAC force will have bare minimum capabilities.

## **Simulation**

With so many requirements for live CAS training, it is expected the emerging capability of virtual simulation must offer some relief. However, there is currently no simulation system available that provides quality TAC training. Air Traffic Control simulators currently used by AF Special Tactics Squadrons are obsolete, logistically unsupportable and reliant on non-dynamic proprietary software.<sup>6</sup> Several improvements to current simulator technology are required before JTAC simulation will significantly enhance training. A good simulator will need to virtually replicate the assets and conditions of actual combat operations for a JTAC. Such a simulator must provide the flexibility to simulate environments from a desert to a major urban center, day or night with varying weather conditions. New simulators must use voice recognition software, eliminating the requirement of a simulator operator to manually input directions. These simulators will not only serve as a training/proficiency aid but also as a mission rehearsal device. Finally, through distributed networking, the TAC simulator should be connected to all the other players such as fighters, AC-130 and helicopter gunships, artillery batteries and command and control agencies. Several emerging systems do show promise, specifically, the AF Special Tactics' Air Ground Integration Simulator (STAGIS).<sup>7</sup> Additionally, SOCOM is currently pursuing virtual rehearsal capability through the SOF Training and Rehearsal System (STRS).<sup>8</sup>

However, even with these capabilities, the simulator will never be as good as the real thing. Simulation can play a key role but it is not a panacea.. No one interviewed for this paper believes that simulators will replace or even lower the number of live controls discussed in the previous chapter. The simulator will allow JTACs to build on their skills and fill the gap between the minimum proficiency numbers and the numbers needed to be highly effective.<sup>9</sup> To

summarize, while emerging simulator technologies show promise in increasing JTAC skill levels, the problem of minimum live controls still exists.

## **CAS Training**

Since live training will never fill the entirety of TAC training requirements, and an effective simulation system is at least five years away, how will the limited number of CAS training sorties be apportioned between each service conventional force and SOF, and within SOF itself? Currently, TACs must fend for themselves using “charm and charisma” to get Combat Air Forces (CAF) to meet their training requirements. Simply said, there is no system for prioritizing CAS training. Another dynamic is that aircrews tasked with a CAS mission in their unit’s Designed Operational Capability (DOC) statement have not been required to talk with an actual ground TAC while doing CAS training. Routinely, a two ship of fighters will Airborne Forward Air Control, or AFAC, for themselves. This method is authorized by regulation and certainly saves time, but cheats both the ground FAC and the pilots out of critical training, and increases the chances that the first time both parties meet will be in actual combat. In other words, we are not training as we intend to fight. Non-traditional CAS aircraft like the B-52 and F-15E were extremely reluctant and at times unwilling to conduct CAS training since CAS was not part of the unit mission and wasn’t a required pilot proficiency item. During OEF, many bomber aircrews learned CAS tactics and procedures for the first time in live combat because of this training myopia.<sup>10</sup> Undoubtedly, a system change must occur to marry aircrews to TACs and force both CAS and traditionally non-CAS aircraft to work with the ground element in a more routine and systemic method. Otherwise, the shortage of live CAS controls in the DoD system will be a limiting factor on the number and proficiency of TACs DoD wide.

## **SOF JTAC Oversight**

Currently, the JCAS JTF operating at Eglin AFB is providing DoD level oversight and coordination for JTAC implementation. However, even when JP 3-09.3 is approved, this JTF will have no authority over how each service will conduct the JTAC program. It will be a service responsibility to set training standards, standardization/evaluation criteria, etc. Should SOCOM use its “component like status” and establish a SOCOM executive agent for SOF JTACs? SOCOM has set a precedent of establishing executive agents to oversee special skill programs. The US Army Special Operation Command is the executive agent for airborne operations and addresses these through SOCOM Regulation 350-3. The Navy is the proponent for diving in SOCOM. These executive agents, through a joint vetting process, write SOCOM regulations for their area of concern that establish operational standards. These agents represent SOF at the higher DoD levels for their respective specialty. COMSOCOM has not yet delegated responsibility for SOF air/ground operations to any of its components (NAVSPECWARCOM, USASOC or AFSOC).<sup>11</sup> The SOF JTAC program will certainly require a single agency to ride herd on training, evaluation and operational issues to insure mission effectiveness on the SOF battlefield.

## **Summary**

This chapter laid the groundwork for the concept of the JTAC program in SOF and discussed limiting factors such as the current lack of live training for JTAC currency and outdated simulation technology. The final chapter will make recommendations to solve these open issues.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Col Robert H. Holmes, Special Assistant to Commander US Special Operations Command, interviewed by author, 12 December 2002.

<sup>2</sup> Lt Col Cheatham, Air Combat Command/DOTO, Langley AFB, VA, interview by author via e-mail, 9 February 2003.

<sup>3</sup> Air Force Instruction (AFI) 11-2A/OA-10V1 11, Aircrew Training A/OA-10, Feb 2000.

<sup>4</sup> Maj Brett Nelson, AF/XOOS Pentagon, interviewed by author via phone, 18 Mar 03.

<sup>5</sup> Pete Hayward, COL, USJFCOM/J85, *Joint Close Air Support Executive Steering Committee DepOpsDeps Update*, 12 Mar 03

<sup>6</sup> David G. Kumas, GS-13, SOAL-FW, US Special Operation Command, *Terminal Attack Control Distributed Simulation Initiative Briefing*. January 2003.

<sup>7</sup> COL Robert H. Holmes, Special Assistant to Commander US Special Operations Command, interviewed via e-mail by author, 25 October 2002.

<sup>8</sup> David G. Kumas, GS-13, SOAL-FW, US Special Operation Command, *Terminal Attack Control Distributed Simulation Initiative Briefing*, January 2003.

<sup>9</sup> Major Michael Martin, Chief, Fire Support Operations 720<sup>th</sup> Special Tactics Group interviewed by author via phone, 21 Jan 03.

<sup>10</sup> Major Michael Martin, Chief, Fire Support Operations 720<sup>th</sup> Special Tactics Group interviewed by author via phone, 21 Jan 03.

<sup>11</sup> COL Robert H. Holmes, Special Assistant to Commander US Special Operations Command, interviewed by author, 8 December 2002.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

#### **UNITY OF COMMAND**

All AF TACs on the SOF battlefield must be centralized under a single operational and administrative commander before the JTAC program introduces joint service TACs into the fight. This single commander will chop off the stove pipes that exist with AF Combat Controllers and TACP personnel operating in the same AOR under different command channels. In Addition, this AF SOF TAC commander will require a standing Air Control Element (ACE) staff to will provide ready fire support operations to the Joint Special Operation Task Force (JSOTF). The ACE will “own” all the AF SOF TACs, as well as plan and execute SOF air/ground operations.

Air Force Special Operations Command (AFSOC), SOCOM’s air component, is the best organization to provide this command and control through their Special Tactics personnel. Special Tactics should gain both administrative and operational control of all TACP personnel currently supporting US Army Special Operations Command, to include the 75<sup>th</sup> Ranger Regiment and Special Forces Command. Gaining administrative as well as operational control is vital to unity of command. Special Tactics should then be tasked to develop five force module elements (one per geographic theater) that will provide an ACE to plan and conduct air control operations in support of JSOTFs. Once JTACs are introduced into the fight, the ACE will be



ready to establish standard operating procedures and coordinate the effective use of all TACs in support of the JSOTF commander's intent. The ACE will serve as the central command and planning element for SOF air/ground operations. The Air Force must establish this capability to provide a clear chain of command from the JSOTF commander to the Tactical Air Controller on the battlefield. In order to do so, SOCOM's air component, AFSOC, must develop the ACE to maximize the effectiveness of airpower in the SOF fight.

Special Tactics, AFSOC's air/ground experts, are the ideal choice to lead the ACE and provide centralized control for combat controllers and SOF TACP personnel. However, Special Tactics is not currently organized in a manner to meet this requirement. The 720<sup>th</sup> Special Tactics Group (720 STG) must be expanded to include an Operational Support Squadron (OSS) which is focused on organizing, training and equipping ACEs in support of unified commanders. This OSS must be a multi-careerfield organization bringing together several Air Force specialties. A requirement clearly exists for Special Tactics to fill the void in SOF tactical air control; the AF must make a small investment of money and personnel to reap the huge dividend that large scale, precision airpower employment brings to the fight.

### **Live Training: Separating Fact from Fiction**

There are not enough live training opportunities to keep the current force of TACs proficient, much less enable the expansion of these numbers through the JTAC program. Chapter 3 outlined this problem in detail and points to the fact that no one really knows how many GFAC training opportunities exist. The Air Force must get serious if they truly want to fix this problem and have true air/ground synergy. The solution has three parts: 1) Establish pilot currency requirements to work with TACs; 2) Develop a coordinating board to prioritize and

allocate the scarce live training opportunities; and 3) implied in this board, create a system that can actually track the amount of live JTAC/aircrew training accomplished.

First, no current Air Force Instruction requires a pilot to ever work with a ground controller in order for the pilot to maintain Close Air Support currency.<sup>1</sup> Flying units that have CAS as a Designed Operational Capability (DOC) mission statement will need to meet currency requirements in order to work with ground TACs. Additionally, flying units that drop bombs but do not have CAS in their DOC statement must also have a currency requirement, although less stringent, to work with ground TACs. These regulation changes will build a combat effective air/ground team through Ready Aircrew Program (RAP) quotas, and will avoid the first-time-in-combat problem that occurred in Afghanistan. The mechanism for effecting this change is an AF wide change to the RAP.

Secondly, live training opportunities may never meet the growing JTAC requirement. Therefore, DoD must establish a prioritized system for ensuring personnel get the training necessary to conduct their assigned mission. US Transportation Command has both a movement priority table that makes sense of the overwhelming requirement for airlift, and a board that meets quarterly to allocate limited aircraft for airborne (jump) training. Whoever emerges as the DoD executive agent for JTAC must establish a similar system to manage the limited number of live training opportunities for JTACs.

Finally, the force provider must quantify this limited live training “resource” in order to track the delta between the sorties required to maintain a combat ready TAC force and what is actually achievable.<sup>2</sup> The AF must designate a lead organization that can track the allocation of live-fly JTAC training. The author recommends that the JCS Joint Close Air Support Executive Steering Committee appoint ACC, JFCOM, or AFSOC to manage this responsibility.

In summary, the problem of insufficient training for JTACs will not be solved until: the Air Force requires its pilots to conduct routine training with ground forward air controllers, mandated through the RAP; The DoD establishes a prioritization schedule and mechanism for allocating JTAC live-fly training; and lastly, the DoD develops a measuring stick to gauge the effectiveness of these programs.

### **The Simulator Solution**

Simulation technology does not provide the necessary level of fidelity to train today's controllers. Therefore, service components, and in particular SOCOM, must invest in distributed training and simulation systems so the technology can evolve to the level that will enable some of the JTAC's training to be met through virtual reality. Although the basic currency requirement of six live controls every six months will be a part of a JTAC's training for the foreseeable future, simulation on next generation virtual mission rehearsal systems will greatly enhance a TAC's basic skills. The SOF Training and Rehearsal System (STRS) and the Special Tactics Air Ground Integration Simulator (STAGIS) need to have their capabilities integrated, operationally tested, and funded as a priority project. The training value provided by a realistic 21<sup>st</sup> century simulation system will be a force multiplier in managing flying dollars required to support the JTAC capability. DoD needs to get this technology off the "great idea" list before JTAC live fire training requirements becomes unmanageable.

### **SOCOM's JTAC Proponent**

SOCOM has historically assigned propanancy of key skills to one of the command's components. SOF terminal attack control and the JTAC program as it applies to SOCOM should have a component level executive agent. AFSOC, the air component of SOCOM, would be the

logical choice to provide oversight of SOF airpower issues such as terminal attack control. As mentioned in the previous chapter, DoD must establish some type of oversight for the entire JTAC program. As SOCOM's JTAC executive agent, AFSOC would provide "service-like" representation to the Joint Staff/Office of Secretary of Defense level. This responsibility would include developing, standardizing and evaluating TAC procedures, and promoting the development of technologies that enhance the airpower/SOF partnership. SOCOM needs AFSOC to step-up and take the lead on SOF air/ground integration issues to maximize the effectiveness of SOF on the objective.

## **Summary**

This chapter provides recommendations on the JTAC program as it applies to SOF. The JTAC program will fill the gap between minimal emergency close air support skills and the "surgeon-like" skills a full-time air controller brings to the fight. A recommendation was made to clean-up the command lines between two groups of air controllers, the Air Force TACP and combat controller, by organizing all AF SOF controllers under Special Tactics. A three-part recommendation was presented on how to maximize live training opportunities, and an additional recommendation was offered to prioritize simulator development. Finally, the chapter recommends that SOCOM appoint AFSOC to serve as the executive agent for SOF terminal attack control issues.

## **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Air Force Instruction (AFI) 11-2A/OA-10V1, Aircrew Training A/OA-10, 11 February 2000

<sup>2</sup> COL Robert H. Holmes, Special Assistant to Commander US Special Operations Command, interviewed via e-mail by author, 20 Feb 2003.

## **EPILOGUE**

This research paper is based on events occurring through early 2003. Operation IRAQI FREEDOM will undoubtedly provide numerous lessons learned for ground controlled airpower application. The author believes that the lessons from IRAQI FREEDOM will only substantiate the findings of this paper that the JTAC program is needed and will benefit the national cause if proper training, qualification and proficiency standards are maintained. Further research should be conducted on the effectiveness of airpower in the urban environment since very little contemporary experience exists in this area. This research will enhance future GFAC/aircrew training for follow-on urban ground/air operations.

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